

**Faith in the Cemetery – The Rt. Rev. Leo Frade, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida
Easter Day, April 12, 2009 - Trinity Cathedral, Miami**

When we think of a cemetery what comes to mind are probably crying, mourning, sadness, and desperation. Maybe also flowers, manicured green lawns, mausoleums and perhaps grieving family members missing their loved ones that they can not see anymore. But what probably doesn't come to mind is the birthing of one of the central beliefs of our Christian faith.

Funerals and burials are part of my work. Clergypersons have no choice but to deal with the sadness and desperation that pain and death brings to us. We are to deal with joy, but we also have to deal with pain.

I have not found a priest yet who enjoys funerals and burials. I'm sure that going to funerals it is not the preferred thing for most of you to do, either.

Psychologists claim that one of the reasons why we don't like to be near the dead is because in every death we can see our own death. It is true; the only things that we are guaranteed in life are death and taxes—and April 15 is just three days from today.

That brings me to the Easter Sunday Gospel story. It takes place in a cemetery, and we should note that something extraordinary happened in that cemetery.

Some may think that our faith began at the cross of Calvary, but I contend that the birth of our faith took place when Christ rose from the dead in that cemetery.

At the cross of Calvary the only things we could see were defeat, tears, suffering and the pain of death. Hope was gone and darkness was upon us.

It was in the midst of that darkness that Mary Magdalene went to the cemetery. When she realized that the stone at the entrance of the tomb had been removed, she panicked and believed that somebody had stolen the body. It was then that she ran to tell the disciples, who were hiding at the time in fear and defeat.

It was only when she returned to the tomb, now that the darkness was gone, that she found the two angels asking her why she was weeping. At that moment she turned around and saw another man that also asked her why she was weeping.

Mary Magdalene, thinking that he was the gardener of the cemetery, asked him where he had taken the body. But when she heard the voice of that man calling her by name she realized that it was Jesus himself.

It was at that precise moment that the faith that we celebrate today was born. It was in that encounter that for the first time an unequivocal proclamation of Jesus' resurrection began to take place.

Today we, like she, are called to proclaim that the Christ who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and who suffered death and was buried on the third day, rose again in accordance with the Scriptures.

How many times have we said the Nicene Creed without fully realizing the amazing declaration that we are making: That Jesus rose from the dead and that he is alive; that faith was born in a cemetery on that Easter Sunday, so that today we can proclaim like Mary Magdalene that our Lord is risen indeed.

It is that same wonderful Gospel story that tells us how defeat was transformed into victory, suffering and pain into joy and rejoicing, tears into laughter and darkness into light.

My question for you this morning is: Do you believe? I hope and pray that you do, but if you don't you are not the only one.

When we read the Gospel stories and see what happened afterwards, we can see how hard it was at the beginning for those disciples to believe such an unbelievable story.

In all truth I can say that we do not believe in Christ's resurrection because we are able to prove it scientifically, but that we try to prove it because we cannot help but believe it.

The evidence for the physical resurrection is very strong indeed. When the disciples went to the cemetery and saw the tomb, they found that Jesus' body was gone. Besides that first appearance to Mary Magdalene, in the next six weeks Jesus was seen by several hundred of witnesses on at least ten different occasions. The lives of those disciples were radically transformed, and the Christian church was born and grew at a dynamic rate.

A former Lord Chief Justice of England, Lord Darling said of the Resurrection: "In its favor as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the Resurrection story is true."

The only satisfactory explanation for these facts is that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead and thus confirmed that He was, and is, the Son of God.

Every time I stand in this cathedral or at any church of our diocese to officiate at a funeral, I don't see myself as an extension of the funeral home or as one who is in charge in fulfilling one of our Western culture's rite of passage, or even as a kind of immigration officer in charge of giving a visa for travel to that other world.

My presence as a minister of God in every funeral challenges all the grief and pain of those who are mourning. I challenge them to see in death the gate of eternal life.

It's important to remind them God's promises from the Scriptures that their loved ones, being raised with Christ, will know the strength of his presence and rejoice with him in his eternal glory.

Let me ask you that question again: Do you believe?

Do you believe what we say in the Apostles' Creed that Christ was crucified, died and was buried, descended to the dead and on the third day he rose again? Do you believe?

This belief is central to our faith. I know that some have tried to explain it as something that was a product of the imagination of the disciples and an illusion of the many witnesses who encountered what they imagined to be the resurrected Christ.

I will not apologize for being an old bishop and for saying that I believe in the resurrection of our Lord.

Yes, I believe that Christ was crucified, died and was buried, but on the third day he rose again from the dead.

I believe that we serve a living God, not one who remained dead and defeated, but one who is able to give answers for our doubts, our longings and all of our struggles. I believe—and I want you to believe.

C. S. Lewis said that he found in himself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, and the most probable explanation, he said, is that he was made for another world.

The Gospels tell us that our faith began to be proclaimed by the women at the cemetery. They were the ones that encountered the resurrected Christ for the first time. They went and told the disciples, so that they also were able to encounter our living Lord.

After seeing the living Christ, the disciples lost their fear, came out of their hiding places and began boldly to proclaim the resurrected Christ; and from there on, our faith was spread throughout the world by those who also encountered the living Christ in their lives.

Now I don't want you to be confused as Mary Magdalene was when you encounter Jesus in your lives. Remember what she did at the beginning?

She thought that the man she had encountered was the gardener so she asked him what you would ask a gardener instead of what you would ask when approaching our living God.

How sad it is when we are confused about in whom we can put our trust. These past months have been hard days for all of us and for our country as we face the financial collapse of many institutions in which we had put our trust.

Many people I know saw their nest eggs being reduced drastically, and we read of others that lost most of what they had saved for years.

One of the saddest things is to hear how for some there seems to be no hope of a financial rebirth of our nation. I say to them, do not lose your hope—our country's resilience will stand the onslaught of this adversity that was created by, among other things, unregulated greed. Better days lie ahead for all of us.

But at the same time I want all of us to be reminded not to make the same mistake again. Do not confuse Jesus the Christ for the gardener, whom you could tip with a couple of bucks for cleaning the tombs. Christ expects much more from you—he expects all of you.

He wants your time, your talent, and your treasure. He desires from you to care for the poor, the oppressed and those who are neglected by society. He expects from you to care for his creation and to help conserve the natural resources of the world. He expects from you to love and care for his bride, the church.

Our resurrected Christ cares for his church and he doesn't expect a couple of bucks for cleaning your tomb when you pass away. He expects much more than that.

What else could we give our God who now cares for our loved ones that have passed away and are in his presence, as he will care for us and all of our loved ones that share with us today this earthly pilgrimage?

This Easter Sunday do not look among the dead for the One who lives. It is now time for you to leave the cemetery, time for you to stop grieving, time you to go out and proclaim that Jesus Christ is alive, and that you are alive. To proclaim that our future depends on him, that our lives are in his hands and that he will keep us and care for us here and for all eternity.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.